

Lee Passarella

—from *Swallowed up in Victory*

Petersburg
August 1, 1864

All quiet, the air a black miasma, the stench
a thing you lug around with you, like the corpse
they'd strap to the villain's chest in Bible days. . . .

This morning, both sides called a truce so the dead
could be removed. Drew burial duty, worked
among a bunch of Yanks as thunderstruck
as I. Dear God, to think that man could come
to so reduced a state as those dead beasts
we carried off, black with putrefaction,
blown with noxious gas, like the gullet of a frog
or bladder of a fish! There's no humanity
about those noisome things. I wept to see
such degradation—many did.

I've been
in battles now one crueler than another,
but the one on Saturday was desperate
beyond all measure. Bayonets, clubbed muskets,
fire at range so close you saw the blood
and brains fly, saw the man you shot go down.

I'd been on picket duty half the night
and was asleep, down in my rabbit hutch.
I started bolt upright; the ground was shaking
like a railway train or herd of cattle

thundering overhead. I thought these jaws
of mine (that generally have so little to grind on)
'd break! I ran "upstairs" in time to have
a hail of mud and lumber fall on me.

"G_____n it!" someone yelled across the way.

I found out later it was Reds Mabry,
who's my old pard—somebody's severed leg
had brushed right past his shoulder, raining daubs
of blood on him as it went by! Awful
that was, but we saw worse thereafter—God!
much worse. . . .

The Yankees followed up the blast
with pounding salvos—every howitzer,
Napoleon, and ordnance piece they owned
was trained on us. Most fled toward the rear.
Old Bushrod was so far behind the lines,
at breakfast like a man of leisure, that he didn't
know till after sunup what had happened
hereabouts.

It slowly dawned on us
the Yanks would soon be spilling through that hole
their bomb had blown. We tried to form up ranks
with fumbling, cussing inefficiency.
But Colonel Fitz was thinking on his feet, he got
what boys were left assembled fairly quick.
We ran to what had been the salient, now
a scene of devastation beyond belief.
The slabs of still-warm flesh that lay about,
together with the shards of every sort of gear,
from coats and hats and haversacks to cannons!
God, if ever I inclined toward
belief in the Good Book's Lake of Fire, why, here
was what it must, in small, look like!

We joined
with little Bill Mahone's boys, fought our way
back up to the crater's edge. When we got there,
we ran smack into colored troops! Some whites
went wild, they clubbed and bayoneted niggers
left and right, and even ones who hoped

to surrender. "Kill the niggers! Spare the whites,
and kill the niggers!" God in heaven, I hear
them shouting, still! I couldn't help but think
of Daddy's blacks at home, like Ed and Boss,
that I grew up with. They're men certainly
as any backwoods Alabamian,
no matter what their color! Jesus, how
could anyone treat men like that. . . ?

We fought
around that crater till the Yankees called
it quits, till maybe 12 or 1 o'clock.
We found out later on that half our men
were hurt or killed before the battle had
begun. Sergeant Blankenship was killed,
and so were Metts and Whiting. Reds was wounded—
arm ripped up a bit—though he'll be fine.
But General Elliott is hurt so bad,
he'll soon see home again—his Heavenly,
if not the other. God be with him, then! . . .
The 18th Regiment's done for, about—
most blown to pieces when the fort went up.

For once, the Reverend Burket's nearly speechless.
Saw him on the killing ground, as white and haggard
as a hungry prophet in retreat. Wednesday last,
he preached at weekly meeting and took his text
from Matthew 24. I couldn't help
but think there was significance in such
a choice. For when I saw that crater filled
with its ghostly waste, its warring specters lost
in smoke and wrack, I thought about those times—
in Jesus' words—when two will be in the field,
one taken, the other left behind.

Old friend,
you know I may make light of parsons and their truck,
but God's Word speaks aloud to me at times
like these. Perhaps this *is* a vision of the end,
these works and trenches stretching far as the eye
can see, the endless browns and grays of mire

and hewn-down trees. The world we knew before
might just as well be sunk beneath this present
hell, and in the wings, new earth and heaven awaiting
birth, as in the Word. Yet God appears so far
away. . . .

A private in our mess inherited
a jug from some poor soul who won't require
its services again this side of Glory—
shared it with us all. It went down well today,
you can believe. The pity is, we couldn't
requisition half a dozen more!

Virgil J. Cabell
Corporal, 17th South Carolina

At Petersburg
October 4, 1864

Lieber Martin:

Grusse aus Virginien! I am well
and hope that you are too. I know you're safe,
at least, 400 miles behind the lines,
there in your Papa's offices. But were
the war to ever come as far as Broadway,
we can count on you, I'm sure!

There's not
much time for correspondence, you can guess.
This is the first chance that I've had to write,
so I will use it to advantage—make you squirm
with envy.

On the 30th last, I finally "saw
the elephant," which is to say I fought
in my first battle. I can tell you it is
nothing like the books I've read, where heroes
have the luxury of time and thinking space
to plan great acts of valor. I could only
concentrate on these two things: my sergeant,

and my own beloved arse! (which I'll explain if you read on a space). Of course in war, you wait around for things to happen, meaning you've more time to fret. So when the order came to move, my knees were limp as potted jelly. There is blessed little question of heroics with your limbs all trapped in aspic!

Anyhow,
that day, l e i s u r e l y, locked arm to arm,
we moved across a space of half a mile
toward these Rebel breastworks near a farm.
And all we ever heard was "Steady, steady!"
(had to get in range before we fired)
while every moment shells were crashing here
and there. One landed in a tree above
our heads. Big shreds of bark and limbs fell down.
I looked with tender longing at the little hillocks
that we passed, but it was "Steady!" still.
And then a shell hit on my right, and two
men fell. I couldn't help but look at them:
One's arm was ripped off near the shoulder. There
he lay, just like a tailor's dummy someone's
tossed in a heap. His face all gashed and bloody,
a flap of skin pulled back like he'd been scalped.
You know, the boys who'd been through this before
had told me, *keep eyes forward, don't take in
the sights*, but who remembers good advice
with grapeshot overhead? *Vor Gott*, I thought
I'd shit myself! (The veterans told me later
that if I had, I needn't be ashamed.
They'd had their britches full a time or two
themselves!)

I did a quick about face. Well,
the next thing I knew, Sgt. Cornwell had
my shoulder in a grip as mighty as a stevedore's.
He shouted, "Damn you, boy, you'll not turn tail
while *I'm* in charge of you!" and after that,
I toed the mark. *Verflucht!* that rotten bastard
scares me more than Rebel howitzers!

Their muskets fired a volley, then once more.
 A ball whizzed by my ear; I felt one graze
 my coat sleeve. Sidelong glances told me men
 were being hit and falling down the line,
 but I was going nowhere if not forward!

The order came to fire. That volley would
 have deafened you! I'd never heard its like
 before. It was enlivening, I warrant!
 We begun to shout and went at double-quick
 (a kind of run) across those last few rods,
 and then we started in to storm the works.
Ach, what a sight! the flags a-flapping, while
 that big blue line of ours descended on
 the Johnnies like a floodtide threatening
 to swallow up a beach!

We climbed the works;

I ran so fast, I knocked a Rebel down
 with just the muzzle and flat of my bayonet,
 not even trying to—but he stayed down!
 When he came to, he learned he'd soon enjoy
 the good sea air Fort Delaware affords!
 The others broke and ran. What do you know?
 My very first encounter, and a victory!
 So now that *I'm* at the front, we'll make short work
 of this ragtag Confederacy!

We seized

a gun (we just recaptured it was all,
 for it was really ours but had been won
 in earlier fighting) and some battle flags.
 You're wrong if you think flags are only bits
 of colored cloth, since color sergeants die
 in droves to have the honor of toting them.
 That's not my cup of tea, especially
 the dying part, of course!

Well, here I'll say
aufwiedersehen. Please remember me
 to all the boys (and girls!) back home. Don't drink
 too much, stay well, and make a pot of money!
Dein freund,

August Kalkbrenner
 Private, 146th New York

Petersburg
November 12, 1864

It's been a while since I have penned my thoughts,
 a hazard almost unavoidable
 in this particular vale of tears. The 5th,
 that schoolmarm Bushrod (maybe Anderson)*
 cooked up a plan to take the trench across
 from us, at moonset—2 o'clock or so.
 It was a good idea, if the Yanks had only
 cooperated, which they did to some extent.
 We took their pickets down without a fight,
 though there was just enough commotion
 that other Yanks were roused. But unprepared
 for us, they fell in droves.

We cleared the front-line
 trench and started to advance, but then the Bluecoats
 came from everywhere. We scrapped with them
 like banty roosters—even overmanned
 as much as two to one. Usually,
 I'd be the first to call it quits, but now
 so many men were hurt, I saw that someone
 had to cover the retreat. I held the Yankees
 off with bayonet and musket butt
 until our boys had cleared the trench. That's when
 I caught a minie ball above the breast,
 the fleshy part (so nothing vital was involved).
 I didn't even know how bad it was
 until I'd clambered back into our lines

and saw my blouse was sopping wet with blood.
 I might have died right there, but Longwood clapped
 his palm across the wound and held it till
 he'd hauled me back to hospital.

That shot

had gone clean through, the hole was oozing like a spring.
 So once he'd started in to work on me,
 the sawbones knew he had as hard a row
 to hoe as he had seen in quite a while.
 His nerves were frazzled—as with all the docs
 you see these days—from overwork. He cursed
 and sweated like a teamster, seemed surprised.
 “G_____n!” he swore. “I’m going to lose this man.”
 “The hell you will! I’ll stick to you like plaster.”
 Then he smiled and said, “I’m sorry, soldier.
 Guess you doubt my skill right now.” I thought,
You’re all I have, man. You will have to do.

That’s all that I remember, but he must
 have kept at me like Jacob with the angel, holding on
 till he’d been blessed. I know that’s how he felt,
 for later, when he came to see me at the hospital,
 he had this strange, proprietary air,
 as if he had a lien up on my life.
 In fact, I think you’d have to say he does! . . .

Virgil J. Cabell, Corporal
 17th South Carolina

[*Major General Bushrod R. Johnson, Division Commander
 Lieutenant General Richard P. Anderson, Corps Commander
 IV Corps Army of Northern Virginia]

Petersburg
January 31, 1865

Dear Aunt Julie:

The last that I received from you was yours
of 28 December. Sad to hear
of Albert's passing. He was always kind
to me when we were small and shall be missed.
Of course my deep regrets to Hannah and the girls. . . .

I write with what we hope is great good news.
Today, a peace commission that includes
Vice President Stephens was permitted through
the lines. They passed near where that Yankee mine
went off, then sped for City Point. The town
turned out in all the finery it could muster
after four long years of want to wish
them godspeed, wizened Mr. Stephens waving
his old-fashioned beaver hat to us
from the carriage window, the while our ladies waved
their gloves and hankies with frantic gaiety.
The few small children that remain in town
ran following after, in their dust. A band struck up
from over in the camps, the musicians playing thinly,
as starved musicians might, the Bonnie Blue Flag,
My Maryland, and other jaunty airs
that, till quite lately sounded all too hollow.
It recalled the happier, early days—
Balls Bluff, Manassas, Fredericksburg—when we'd
good cause to cheer.

We've heard of overtures,
initiatives, before that came to naught,
but I will cling to this slim hope since hope's
as rare as hens, let 'lone those mythic hen's
teeth of the proverb!

Jim came home on leave
last week and looks to have aged a year, poor soul!

He's grieved to see the army starved, in rags,
 as it is now. At hospital, I see
 young men, grown old and helpless, die in droves
 of children's ails—of colds and mumps and measles.
 If once they get a cut upon their hands,
 their arms become infected, gangrenous,
 then phagadenic (or necrotic or whatever doctors
 call it). Death ensues within a week,
 perhaps, of the time that they fall sick, and no
 recourse to medicine can save them. Though
 of course, there *is* no medicine.

I think

that God inures us to our griefs, or we'd all die
 of broken hearts. But as it is, I'm deadened
 so to hurt. I feel a callous brute
 at times. Well, better that than hope beyond
 all compass. May God grant us peace. If not,
 at least a saving cynicism—which
 you well might think I have enough of now!

I'll write as I learn more. Be well and safe.

Your favorite niece,

Amelia Willis Dettmold

Petersburg
April 3, 1865

Dear Aunt Julie:

Though I can't say how I shall *ever* post
 this letter, I will write it just the same.
 So much to tell—my Lord, so many sorrows!
 Yesterday, the army all withdrew
 from Petersburg and Richmond. As they left,
 they fired the warehouses in town—munitions
 and tobacco. All last night it seemed the town

would surely be consumed. But since, they've put
 the fire out, and it is deadly quiet,
 something we've not known in months. I've heard
 that Grant and that—*orangutan* in tailcoat,
 Father Abr'ham, haunted our poor city
 with their devilish presences, though they're now gone.
 I meant to walk defiantly downtown,
 to see our base tormentors, but could not
 find strength to do so. Jane and I've not left
 the house in days.

Dear Aunt, I *had* believed
 and hoped my Jim was with the army, fleeing west.
 But just before the troops withdrew, a boy
 came to the house to say he's heard that Jim
 was captured at Stedman! "God, it couldn't be,"
 I said. "Jim is an engineer. How could
 they ever capture him in such an action?
We attacked the Yanks, not otherwise!"
 The boy assured me what he said was true,
 that Jim had asked to be assigned to the squad
 of sappers who went first to clear the way
 before the assault was made. And when I asked,
 incredulously, why he'd do a thing
 so rash, the boy replied he guessed because
 Jim felt that's where he'd do the greatest good!
 My God, the man has always thought the South
 would fall if not for his noble sacrifice!
 And now, if what the boy has said is true,
 he's given all—or nearly so—for what?
 The Confederacy's in shards, those wraiths who follow
 Lee have every bit as little hope
 of freedom as Actaeon running from his hounds. My poor,
 dear gallant fool! Aunt Julie, pray for me!
 You know I love that d____d fool man of mine
 and crave his safe return—and nothing more!

Your loving niece,

Amelia Willis Dettmold

Lee Passarella is the Literary Editor of *Atlanta Review*. His poetry has appeared in *The Formalist*, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Chelsea*, *The Sun*, *Cream City Review*, *BlueLine*, *Antietam Review*, and *Black Dirt*. The poems printed here are from a collection about the siege of Petersburg, entitled, *Swallowed up in Victory*.